Inside the Roller-Coaster Journey to Get David Lynch's 'Twin Peaks' Back on TV

feature.variety.com/twin-peaks/

5/8/2017

Director David Lynch had a vision to bring his iconic cult series back to TV — but making it a reality proved a challenge all its own

Story by Maureen Ryan
Photographs by Kurt Iswarienko

red room. A dream version of Laura Palmer. An older Special Agent Dale Cooper, silent and pensive. The Man From Another Place, speaking cryptically: “That gum you like is going to come back in style.”

It was early 1989, and Lynch was hard at work on “Twin Peaks.” He and co-creator Mark Frost were trying to meet the deadlines of ABC, the network that had commissioned a drama about love, pie and murder in a Pacific Northwest town. Lynch was under pressure to create scenes that would allow the pilot to be released as a TV movie in case it didn’t get picked up to series. But the filmmaker didn’t have any ideas for footage that could wrap up the story neatly enough to please a movie audience.

Then he walked outside during an early-evening break from editing and folded his arms on the roof of a car.

“The roof was so warm, but not too warm,” Lynch says. “It was just a really good feeling — and into my head came the red room in Cooper’s dream. That opened up a portal in the world of ‘Twin Peaks.’”

That vision ended up in the third episode — but more importantly, it would lay the groundwork for the highly anticipated revival of the series, which returns May 21 on Showtime. It’s an older Cooper that anchors the series.

While countless reboots of numerous series have crashed and burned, it’s safe to say few have been as intensely followed by fans as this one. As Showtime CEO David Nevins put it, “‘Twin Peaks’ as a place is a proper noun, but it’s almost become an adjective.”

Since the show's debut in April 1990, many dramas have tried to create the kind of evocative, twisted atmosphere "Twin Peaks" exuded from the first twanging notes of Angelo Badalamenti's yearning score. And though intense dramas about murders that reverberate through tight-knit communities are now easy to find on TV, no show has come close to achieving the mix of humor, soapy drama, sincerity and corrupted purity found within the strange confines of "Twin Peaks."

That's because much of what's distinctive about the drama emerges from the most unpredictable corners of Lynch's mind — like that red room epiphany.

"It comes in a burst," Lynch explains. "An idea comes in, and if you stop and think about it, it has sound, it has image, it has a mood, and it even has an indication of wardrobe, and knowing a character, or the way they speak, the words they say. A whole bunch of things can come in an instant."

Frost describes a case in point: "I remember him calling me to say, 'Mark, there's a giant in Cooper's room,'" he says. "I learned early on that it was always best to be very receptive to whatever might bubble up from David's subconscious."

The first iteration of "Twin Peaks" lasted only two seasons — 30 episodes in all — but the show left a legacy that would help define auteur TV.

"I don't think anyone who ever saw 'Twin Peaks' will ever have it not ingrained in their memory and imagination for the rest of their lives," says Laura Dern, a frequent Lynch collaborator who plays a mysterious role in the new season.

Yet getting the series back on-screen was no easy feat. At one point, the revival almost fell apart before production began. It would take delicate negotiations by all parties to rescue the project.

"I was an actual, genuine lover of 'Twin Peaks' and the world that [Lynch] created, and I knew his filmography really well," Nevins notes. "[We said] we would take the ride with him, and that we would treat it well and treat it with the respect that it deserved. I think we did. We bobbed and weaved with him; we were patient when we had to be patient."

I believe in intuition. I believe in optimism, and energy, and a kind of a Boy Scout attitude, and Cooper's got all those things."

David Lynch

ynch and Frost began talking about returning to "Twin Peaks" in August 2012, in part because the show's baked-in time jump was approaching — in that pivotal red room scene, Agent Cooper is 25 years older. The two men shared ideas over meals at Musso & Frank, and after the writing process had begun in earnest, they started to shop the revival around. They settled on Showtime fairly quickly, given their history with the executives.

Gary S. Levine, Showtime's president of programming, has known Frost and Lynch since his days at ABC. Almost three decades ago, he was one of the execs who heard their pitch for the TV show they initially called "Northwest Passage." (Levine still has the memo that notes the date of the first concept meeting for the pilot — Aug. 25, 1988.)

But as with everything Lynch, the agreement for the redux came down to instinct: A final piece of the puzzle, say the execs, was a painting in Nevins' office of a little girl next to a bookcase that looks like it may fall on her. "I was making the pitch about why he should come here and why we would treat his property right, and he mostly stood there and stared at the painting," Nevins recalls. (For his part, Lynch says the painting wasn't the deciding factor, but he smiles at the memory of seeing it.)

The deal closed in the fall of 2014, with an order of nine episodes; the following January, Lynch hand-delivered a 400-page document.

"It was like the Manhattan phone book," Frost says. Their plan was to shoot the entire thing — with Lynch at the helm of every episode —and then edit the resulting footage into individual episodes.

It's hard to imagine wrestling that 400-page behemoth into a briefcase, let alone giving notes on it. When talks broke down, however, the conflict wasn't about the script but rather the project's budget.

In April 2015, the director went public with his growing displeasure, tweeting that "after 1 year and 4 months of negotiations, I left because not enough money was offered to do the script the way I felt it needed to be done."

Lynch's threatened departure generated a flurry of commentary, most of which said that a version of the TV show without him would be worse than no "Twin Peaks" at all.

"I didn't want 'Twin Peaks' without Lynch either," Nevins says drily.

The Showtime chief says he was out of the country when negotiations hit that difficult

patch. Lynch wanted the flexibility to expand the length of the season, but he didn't know exactly how many episodes he'd end up with. He hoped it would be possible to go longer than the 9 or 13 installments that had been discussed, but he ran into resistance from the network's business affairs department.

"It didn't fit into the box of how people are used to negotiating these kinds of deals," Nevins says. "Once I understood what the issues were from the point of view of the filmmaker, I was like, 'OK, we can figure that out.' And we did — it turned out not to be very complicated to [resolve]."

Nevins and Levine went over to the director's house. "Gary brought cookies," Lynch recalls. And over baked goods and coffee, the three men hashed everything out.

Lynch, says Nevins, has a history of being responsible. "He said, 'Give me the money; I will figure out how to apportion it properly.' And he did," Nevins says. (Levine says the cost of "Twin Peaks" is comparable to that of Showtime's other high-end dramas.)

Asked for his side of the story, Lynch asks, "What did Showtime say?" Told their version, he signs off: "Basically, that's it." He says his relationship with the network ever since the cookie summit has been "solid gold." (Treats never hurt: When he delivered cuts of the new season, he sent along doughnuts.)

I don't think anyone who ever saw 'Twin Peaks' will ever have it not ingrained in their memory and imagination for the rest of their lives."

Laura Dern

he mystery of the first season of "Twin Peaks" was, famously, "Who killed Laura Palmer?" The mystery of the reboot is, well — nearly everything. None of the 18 episodes will be released in advance to critics, and very few details have leaked out.

Though cast members such as Kyle MacLachlan (Agent Cooper), Madchen Amick (Shelly Johnson), Sherilyn Fenn (Audrey Horne) and Ray Wise (Leland Palmer) are returning, others, including Joan Chen, Michael Ontkean and Lara Flynn Boyle, won't be back. No one will say what characters are being played by new recruits Dern, Ashley Judd, Tim Roth, Naomi Watts and Robert Forster — there's a roster of more than 200 characters in the new season. Frost's father, Warren; Catherine Coulson, the Log Lady; and Miguel Ferrer, who played the irascible Albert Rosenfield, all filmed scenes before they died.

Nevins lets it slip that Lynch's character, the hearing-impaired FBI Regional Bureau Chief Gordon Cole, is "pretty prominent" in the new season. "I probably said too much," he adds.

MacLachlan says that Lynch enjoys the world of "Twin Peaks" so much that he couldn't resist putting himself back in it. But he admits that, for his part, he finds it hard to stay in character when he's doing scenes with his director. "Unless we're really both firmly rooted in what we're doing, we tend to start laughing and messing up," the actor says. Stopping for a moment, the actor reconsiders: "David, when he works, he's very committed to Gordon. So when I'm in there with him, he's able to really hold it. He holds it better than I do, to be honest."

For those expecting a similar structure to the original, which revolved around Laura's death, Frost issues a warning: "It's going to be very different this time around."

The scope of the reboot is greater, says Nevins, adding that the new installments of the drama reflect Lynch's advancement as an artist.

"I think he's evolved to an even more extreme version of himself, but all of the [Lynch] themes are visible," Nevins says. "He has certain ideas about the ideal of America. Not to relate it too much to the present, but he has certain ideas about Midwestern American wholesomeness. But I think he's also incredibly aware of the flip side of it. I think David Lynch is a really relevant voice: What does it mean when we say, 'Make America great again?'"

Given the wider scope, it's not surprising to hear that, though "Twin Peaks" returned to Snoqualmie, Wash., for some filming, certain storylines in the new season take place outside the Pacific Northwest, and the bulk of the new season was shot in Southern California.

"There are different threads in different parts of the U.S." that eventually converge, Nevins says. "It does not go outside the U.S., but it is in multiple locations in the U.S."

One last clue from Lynch: The film "Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me," he says, is very important to understanding what's coming May 21.

Getting it the way you want it to be, that's a beautiful high and it's a high for everybody. It's difficult to go home and go right to sleep. And it's murder to get up in the morning.

David Lynch

ven if “Twin Peaks” travels outside its forested Pacific Northwest setting, it’s safe to assume there’s still cherry pie on the menu at the Double R Diner. Lynch and Frost’s collaborative process is also still intact; 25 years later, the two men picked up where they left off.

Lynch lives in Los Angeles and Frost resides more than an hour away, so the two men often worked together via Skype. Frost typically writes down what they come up with, and then the two trade notes and talk further to refine the story.

“Getting it the way you want it to be, that’s a beautiful high and it’s a high for everybody,” says Lynch of directing. “It’s difficult to go home and go right to sleep. And it’s murder to get up in the morning.”

Lynch directed every episode of the drama, which wrapped production a year ago. In a perfect world, he says he would have helmed every installment of the original series.

“Not that other directors didn’t do a fine job,” he says. “But when it’s passing through different people, it’s just natural that they would end up with [something] different than what I would do.”

The freedom of airing on a premium channel didn’t change his approach, Lynch says. There’s not much in the way of nudity or extreme violence in the finished product. “You don’t think, ‘Oh, I can do this now,’” he says. “The story tells you what’s going to happen.”

In fact, despite the show’s reputation for being unsettling, most of what’s dark and dangerous about “Twin Peaks” comes from its mood and soundscape, not necessarily from what’s depicted on-screen. Decades ago, ABC executives were excited about Lynch and Frost’s pitch in part because it was, in many ways, relatively conventional. It fit easily into a number of existing TV categories: the classic nighttime soap, the murder mystery, the high school drama and the small-town saga.

TV is the new art house

David Lynch is not the most talkative interviewee. He’s affable but not necessarily chatty. His answers are precise and concise, usually a sentence or two at most.

But when asked if he will continue to make feature films, he gives an impassioned answer — his longest reply by far.

“Feature films are suffering a kind of bad time right now, in my opinion, because the

feature films that play in theaters are blockbusters. That seems to fill the theaters, but the art-house cinema is gone. If I made a feature film, it might play in L.A.

and New York, a couple of other places, for a week in a little part of a cineplex, and then it would go who knows where.

“I built [‘Twin Peaks’] to be on the big screen. It will be on a smaller screen, but it’s built for the big screen.

“You want a feature film to play on a big screen with big sound, utilizing all the best technology to make a world. It’s really tough after all that work to not get it in the theater. So I say that cable television is a new art house, and it’s good that it’s here.”

“There certainly weren’t Standards & Practices issues at the time,” Levine says. “[Lynch’s] imagination took you to new places, not to prurient places. That was a good thing in broadcast TV.”

But the otherworldly elements that Lynch layered in — an indefinable air of mystery, a surreal quality that evoked swooning, bittersweet loss — were among the factors that made the original “Twin Peaks” a ratings and pop-culture sensation. And despite that the second season was more uneven than the first, the show often effectively blended slapstick humor with dream logic, bittersweet romance, heightened melodrama and hints of violence and degradation.

“He’s got both really good craft and storytelling skills, and he also creates his own reality without it violating the reality you’re in,” Levine says. “I think that was one of the great things about the original — it was a really compelling plot, but it also was this acid trip. Somehow those two things coexist beautifully in David Lynch’s world.”

He’s very precise when we talk through the scene, and he tells me what’s going to happen. He has already thought it through, and he sees it.”

Kyle MacLachlan

ynch doesn’t question where inspirations like the red room scene come from; he simply wants to capture them with his cameras. And lest anyone think he’s overly precious about his process, Lynch doesn’t consider himself the creator of these visions.

“It's like that idea existed before you caught it, so in some strange way,

we human beings, we don't really do anything," he says. "The ideas come along and you just translate them."

What might Lynch's response be if an actor said, about a line, "That doesn't feel right to me"?

"I don't know if I've ever said that to him, actually," says MacLachlan, stumped by the question. "I mean, I would never change it. It is there for a reason."

In fact, to hear him tell it, the fact that Cooper is an iconic TV character is in many ways a tribute to the writing for the character, especially in Cooper's debut scene.

"I brought my stuff, yeah," MacLachlan says. "But that's one of the greatest introductions into a story of any that I've ever had — driving up the mountain, talking into a tape recorder about some of the mundane things in life, just kind of cataloguing it. Immediately, you wonder, 'Who is this guy and what is he about?'"

"When I first started with David in 'Dune,' I was full of questions. I would bother him non-stop," MacLachlan says. "He always had a great deal of patience with me. On 'Blue Velvet,' I still [had questions], but less, and then with 'Twin Peaks,' even less. I've stopped having to know everything. I've just said, 'OK, I see where we're going.'"

"For Kyle and I, we've spoken about this incredible gift that we know what [Lynch] means" when he discusses his vision for a scene or a project, Dern says. "We have gone on this journey with him, so we know his language, or what he's inventing. We don't necessarily need to understand it or need it to be logical, but we see where his brain is taking him and we can follow."

Dern and MacLachlan both say they relish the opportunity to work with Lynch because his vision is so specific that it gives them a detailed road map to follow — and it makes the set an efficient place.

"There's no wasted time or wasted emotions, tangents, whatever," MacLachlan notes. "He's very precise when we talk through the scene, and he tells me what's going to happen. He has already thought it through, and he sees it."

Dern marvels at the rigor and enigma of Lynch's process. "David creates these worlds, sometimes all too real and sometimes incredibly absurd, but either way, he places humanity inside them, and his dialogue is so precise, mysterious, unusual and beautiful that you want to dive into that dialogue and hopefully make it soar," she says.

Rewatching “Twin Peaks” recently, MacLachlan was struck by how the editing of the show helps it create a series of moods, from comedic to tautly suspenseful, from romantic to terrifying.

“His timing, his rhythms,” MacLachlansays. “That's what I find so interesting about David Lynch — the way he stretches things or condenses things, or manipulates time to make something either seem more humorous or less.”

'Peak' Moments

“I don’t think anybody felt it was going to go further than just that one-off,” Kyle MacLachlan says of the “Twin Peaks” pilot. Not only did the show get picked up, but its first season offered moments that forever set it apart from anything else on TV.

Episode 2: “There was a fish in the percolator!” “One day my log will have something to say about this. My log saw something that night.” “This is … a damn fine cup of coffee!” The show’s reputation for quotability was cemented in its second episode.

Episode 4: As Agent Cooper (MacLachlan) and Deputy Tommy “Hawk” Hill (Michael Horse) look on, a distraught Leland Palmer (Ray Wise) dances in the hotel lounge.

Episode 5: Agent Cooper and Sheriff Harry S. Truman (Michael Ontkean) go to a vet’s office, where a llama that was supposed to walk through the room stops to stare down the FBI agent. “It was completely unscripted,” MacLachlan recalls.

Episode 7: Trying to keep her undercover job at One-Eyed Jack’s, Audrey Horne (Sherilyn Fenn) uses her tongue to tie a knot in a cherry stem.

Episode 8: Instead of getting some “quality sack time,” Agent Cooper is shot point blank after he arrives in his hotel room.

---

ow all that remains to be seen is how the public responds to the new adventures of Agent Cooper, that avatar of square-jawed all-American perseverance.

“I believe in intuition,” Lynch says. “I believe in optimism, and energy, and a kind of a Boy Scout attitude, and Cooper’s got all those things.”

The most important parallel between Lynch and Cooper is that their belief in their own

intuition is matched by a purposeful, almost single-minded intent. What allows Lynch to put deeply felt images from his subconscious on the screen is a tenacious focus — one that's cloaked in the kind of smiling, friendly optimism that Cooper typically exudes.

"His vision is genuine," Dern says. "He's not interested in creating something so others will be impacted by it. He just sees a world and has to follow it."

Despite the passionate responses his works have created, Lynch doesn't necessarily set out to delve into the hearts and minds of his viewers. He's just an interpreter of something primal — a messenger for the visions that find him.

"I guess, like Mel Brooks said, 'If you don't laugh while you're writing the thing, the audience isn't going to laugh,'" Lynch explains. "If you don't cry or feel it while you're doing it, it's probably not going to translate."

Almost 30 years ago, TV viewers followed Lynch through that portal to the red room. Despite the crowded TV landscape "Twin Peaks" helped create, Nevins thinks audiences will take the journey again.

"I think he does have enormous self-confidence as an artist — that what resonates with him won't resonate with everybody but will resonate with enough people that it's going to make noise in the world," Nevins says.

And if there is silence, that's fine too.

"If nothing happens, it's still OK," Lynch says with a smile. "This whole trip has been enjoyable."

This story has been revised and updated.